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Viewing cable 06CARACAS1213, MURDER OF PRIEST PITS BRV AGAINST CHURCH

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Understanding cables

Every cable message consists of three parts:

- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
- The bottom box presents the body of the cable. The opening can contain a more specific subject, references to other cables ([browse by origin](#) to find them) or additional comment. This is followed by the main contents of the cable: a summary, a collection of specific topics and a comment section.

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06CARACAS1213	2006-05-05 19:42	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Caracas

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.aftenposten.no/spesial/wikileaksdokumenter/article3974099.ece>

VZCZCXRO5917
PP RUEHAG
DE RUEHCV #1213/01 1251942
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 051942Z MAY 06
FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4358
INFO RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 6408
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 5430
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ PRIORITY 1955
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 0179
RUEHMu/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA PRIORITY 1180
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO PRIORITY 3731
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0693
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 2035
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE PRIORITY 0928
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY
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RUEHMI/USOFFICE FRC FT LAUDERDALE PRIORITY 3049
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA PRIORITY 0681
RUCNMEM/EU MEM COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 CARACAS 001213
SIPDIS
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/03/2021
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [KCRM](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: MURDER OF PRIEST PITS BRV AGAINST CHURCH
REF: A. CARACAS 959
[1](#)B. VATICAN 70
CARACAS 00001213 001.2 OF 004

Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) The recent murder of Catholic Priest and senior official of the Venezuelan Bishops' Conference (CEV) has touched off another round of recriminations between the church and state. Father Jorge Pinango was found murdered in a seedy Caracas hotel room on April 24, two days after disappearing. Attorney General Isaias Rodriguez divulged very personal details of the case and implied that the priest had been murdered during a homosexual tryst with a prostitute, an allegation that drew fiery criticism from the church, and even caused some recoil within Chavismo. The three theories about the case are: 1) a street crime involving a hallucinogenic drug; 2) a prostitution case gone bad; and 3) a government operation to sully Venezuela's most trusted institution. While the real facts of the case will probably never be known, we would not completely discount the pretty far-fetched government conspiracy theory, especially given the government's adversarial relationship with the Catholic Church. End summary.

A Real Life Murder Mystery

[1](#)2. (U) The body of Father Jorge Pinango, who was the sub-secretary general of the CEV, was found April 24 in the Bruno Hotel near Caracas' Sabana Grande, an area dotted with such pay-by-the-hour establishments. Pinango, 47, had last been seen alive the early morning of April 22, when he dropped off his niece in the tough Caracas neighborhood of El Valle after a family graduation party. He was wearing street clothes and not attired as a priest. When Pinango failed to return that night to the CEV compound where he resided, senior CEV bishops filed a formal missing persons report. The priest's putrefied body was discovered by the hotel's cleaning staff the following day. His Ford Explorer, registered to the CEV, was found the next day, April 25, at a shopping center in eastern Caracas. There were some reports that a security camera at the shopping center showed more than one person in the vehicle.

[1](#)3. (U) The first press reports, based on testimony of hotel staff, stated that the priest had driven to the hotel at 0540 the morning of April 22 in the company of a young man later identified as Andres Rodriguez Rojas, 26, who was subsequently apprehended on April 26. Rodriguez Rojas reportedly left the room at 0830, paid for the next 24 hours, and then departed the hotel in the Ford Explorer. Rodriguez Rojas then reportedly ran up US\$1,000 in bills on Pinango's credit cards. Investigators found two empty beer cans in the room and a drug later identified as Rivotril (also called Klonopin), an anti-anxiety prescription drug often abused as a depressant. According to medical examiners, Pinango was murdered by suffocation and had scratches on his nose and mouth, and a wound in the anal area.

Attorney General Meltdown

[1](#)4. (U) Attorney General Isaias Rodriguez gave a press conference April 25 with very different details from those described above. He asserted that Pinango's companion was dressed as a woman but was actually a man. He said the

priest had left the room a few hours after entering ask where he could buy drugs (stimulants, Rodriguez said, not depressants), departed the hotel, and returned three hours later. Rodriguez spoke rather indelicately about the injuries to Pinango's private areas, clearly implying that Pinango had been engaged in homosexual activity. Rodriguez said he was forced to reveal these details because the media was attempting to spin the priest's death as an example of Venezuela's growing crime problem. When the head of Venezuela's technical police (CICPC), Marcos Chavez, publicly contradicted many of Rodriguez' facts and said the motive of the murder appeared to be car theft, Rodriguez lashed out at the police chief and announced plans to re-assign investigators and bring Chavez up on charges for conspiring to discredit him. Minister of Interior and Justice Jesse Chacon came out as a sort of Bolivarian referee, declaring that while it was fairly clear the priest was engaged in homosexual activity, it was possible that the priest was asleep at the time. Chacon also noted that the accused had a history of drugging victims in order to rob them.

15. (U) Undeterred, Rodriguez staged a second, lengthy, and emotional press conference in which he assured reporters that the autopsy results would back up his initial claims of an illicit tryst, and asserted that Pinango was partially responsible for his own murder. He also hinted that Pinango suffered from AIDS. Rodriguez then threatened to resign if authorities covered up the truth, leading to a rambling monologue about how Rodriguez had never aspired to the position of Attorney General, was fed up with the BRV bureaucracy, sick of having to have "14 bodyguards," and had very few days left in office. (Note: Rodriguez' seven-year term ends next year.)

The "Burundanga" Drug: Scopolamine

16. (U) The autopsy results, however, showed no traces of a stimulant in the priest's system, according to press reports. The toxicology study did confirm, however, the presence of scopolamine, commonly known as the "date rape drug" or "Burundanga" in Venezuela and Colombia, which reportedly induces a hypnotic state and retrograde amnesia (i.e., victims do not remember details before ingestion). The drug is commonly used in robberies in Caracas, with some reports telling of victims aware enough to operate automatic tellers at the bidding of the perpetrators. (Note: According to Internet sources, the drug was once used as a crude truth serum.)

Catholic Bishops Demand Fair Investigation

17. (U) The CEV issued a communique rejecting Rodriguez' statements, accusing him of tainting the investigation. The bishops admonished the government not to release information at the preliminary stage of the investigation and to pursue the facts of the case. The bishops said Pinango's murder once again showed the "grave situation of lack of security and moral decay" affecting the country. CEV Vice President and Archbishop of Coro Roberto Luckert, an outspoken BRV critic, called for Rodriguez' resignation because, he said, the Attorney General lacked "the common sense and judgment" to handle such a complicated murder case.

18. (C) CEV Secretary General Jose Ramon Vilorio told Poloff May 3 that the CEV had asked veteran criminal lawyer Juan Marin Echeverria (who is also the lawyer for the NGO Sumate) to represent the Church's interests in the case. Vilorio said that Minister of Communications Willian Lara had visited CEV headquarters after Rodriguez' outburst and apologized on behalf of the government. Chacon also phoned CEV President Ubaldo Santana with apologies, and agreed to meet privately with him on May 3. Vilorio doubted the BRV was capable of conducting a fair investigation of the priest's murder.

¶9. (C) Viloría noted that there were three possible explanations for Pinango's murder. First, he said, Pinango might have been murdered during an attempted robbery using the hypnotic drug. Second, he said, it was possible Pinango was engaged in a secretive encounter with a male prostitute. While he said he was fairly sure Pinango was not a homosexual, he thought it unlikely that the priest would imprudently pick up a prostitute and drive with him to a hotel in a CEV vehicle. Also, he recalled Pinango's professional performance during this three years at the CEV, pointing out that Pinango had an appointment at CEV at 0800 that same morning that he uncharacteristically missed. Pinango had never spent the night away from his CEV residence before, Viloría added. He also said he had received word that the hotel room had been reserved the day before, suggesting the crime was not the result of a chance encounter.

¶10. (C) The third possibility was a government-inspired attempt to discredit the Church, which Viloría thought at least 60 percent likely. Information filtered to the CEV from the autopsy indicated that there was no indication of homosexual activity (read, no semen traces). He alleged that the murder suspect had ties to the government, pointing out that his defense attorney, Carlos Duran, is a prominent pro-Chavez attorney who has defended revolutionaries such as Lina Ron. According to Viloría, the suspect also had two government police credentials, though he admitted the suspect was also a known document counterfeiter. Viloría said the bishops suspect that BRV authorities had wanted to kidnap Pinango, apply the "truth serum" drug, and then extract information about former CEV President (and ardent Chavez foe) Baltazar Porras. Viloría said the Pinango murder had put all of the bishops on alert against similar crimes being committed against them.

The Victim Claims Torture

¶11. (U) Suspect Andres Rodriguez Rojas, through his attorney, alleged he was innocent of the murder charges. Attorney Carlos Duran said his client boarded the priest's vehicle with the intention of applying the sleeping drug Rivotril, but the latter became nervous when he suspected they were being followed. Duran claims Venezuelan police held his client for several days, applying torture methods to get a confession. Rodriguez Rojas was then taken to a bus station where, Duran asserted, police staged a public arrest.

Comment

¶12. (C) This case will no doubt join the pantheon of Venezuela's unsolved mysteries, such as the car-bombing of prosecutor Danilo Anderson and the burning death of the soldiers at Fuerte Mara. An investigation free of political tint is all but impossible. We of course cannot draw a conclusion about how or why Pinango was murdered. The idea of BRV operation to discredit the Catholic Church is pretty far-fetched, but not out of the realm of possibility, especially given the Church's recent sparring with the BRV over the Fadoul murders (ref a) and the general tension between the two institutions. Prior to that scrap, it had appeared that the BRV and the Church under Urosa had been seeking a closer relationship, and Bolivarian sources are now pushing the idea of a "moderate" Church faction led by Urosa, challenged by a radical, "golpista" faction, whose patron was retired Cardinal Lara. The BRV's suggestion of this kind of "schism" in the Church will do nothing to calm the waters. Also notable is Attorney General Rodriguez' near implosion and damage control efforts by other Bolivarians. Rodriguez' trademark verbal incontinence has been running fairly wild lately, causing us to wonder if the increasingly uneven A/G will reach the end of his term.

